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ABSTRACT

The image of the family as a secure refuge against a threatening outside world has persisted in the television sitcom since its inception in the early 1950s. Although some television programs have dealt with major problems directly, most, including the sitcom, have completely ignored them. Harnessing hysteria over the possibility of a nuclear attack, early sitcoms made a politically charged point about the status and importance of the nuclear family. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, for example, "Leave It to Beaver" confirmed the sanctity and security of the borders of the nuclear family and its household--any trouble was always generated by someone on the outside. The placing of the symbolic locus of safety in the nuclear family has occurred at the expense of other social movements in the United States; anything short of a traditional family is often portrayed as dangerous. The hardships that come to two-career couples, women over the age of 35 who want to give birth, and couples who send their children to daycare are emphasized in "Trapper John, M.D." and "St. Elsewhere." These negative images of nontraditional approaches to family are buttressed by the positive images of the old-fashioned way of doing things, as presented in "The Cosby Show." Although recently there are some exceptions, such as "The Young Ones," which reverses the customary roles of "inside" and "outside," in general even the seemingly innovative sitcoms are a return to the stable, safely defined parameters of the genre. (Twelve footnotes are appended.) (ARH)

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Nuclear Threats and Nuclear Families:

The Theme of Safety in Family Sitcoms

Robert J. Thompson and Gary Burns

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Nuclear Threats and Nuclear Families:

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"The sit-com operates in a world of Us and Them, and there is room for only so many of Us and no more. If you cannot be one of Us, you automatically become one of Them and we will have as little to do with you as possible and will try our best to keep you and your effects as far from our little family unit as possible."--David Grote, The End of Comedy[1]

"Inherent in most . . . Cold War adventure programs was an image of the world, outside the United States, as wretched and unsettled. Those clinging to the notion [of] a post-war united world of free and equal nation states found little solace in such series. Crime, espionage, poverty and generalized dispiritedness permeated the stories in shows like Orient Express and Terry and the Pirates. Scenes in such programs often showed bombed-out cities or starving characters, this to American viewers grown used to the middle-class, suburban happiness depicted in series like Father Knows Best, The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet, and 77 Sunset Strip. . . . Thus, viewers within 'fortress America' were tempted by Cold War TV to envision the rest of the world as backward and brutal. And within this context, television also assured citizens that they were being protected."--J. Fred MacDonald, "The Cold War as Entertainment in 'Fifties Television[2]

A double threat greeted the United States as it emerged from World War II. The first was the threat to civilization-as-we-know-it by nuclear weapons. The second was the threat to the stability of family life by, among other things, suburbanization, juvenile delinquency, and memories of women's wartime experiences as "Rosie the Riveter."[3] TV, which had also just come to life as various wartime

freezes were lifted, became the forum on which these threats exploded. Paranoia over nuclear bombs was eventually harnassed to make a politically charged point about the status and importance of the nuclear family. Commercial TV was born at the same time that the world had suddenly become more dangerous than ever before in its history. The genre that TV embraced, however, emphasized safety.

Much moreso than on radio, which developed before the atomic age, the family became the principal nucleus around which television programming first developed. Horace Newcomb's 1974 book about TV programming[4] saw the family as the primary trope that identified American dramatic television. On TV, every genre seemed to be enfranchised by the family from the Western (Bonanza) to the variety show (Jack Benny). But nowhere was this more apparent than in the sitcom.

One of TV's earliest sitcoms was Mama (CBS, 1949-1956), a show that had ratings placing it in the top twenty series of the year through the 1952-53 season. It wouldn't be until Family (ABC, 1976-1980) that a show would be so allegorically named. The title of Mama really said it all. Based on the novel Mama's Bank Account by way of a theatrical (1944) and cinematic (1948) adaptation, both titled I Remember Mama, the title of the TV series stripped away all that was superfluous.

By the time Mama appeared, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had provided ample and frightening images to illustrate the opening of the atomic age. Photographs and films made it graphically clear that the rules of the war game had changed. People were vaporized, kimonos were tattooed onto the backs of civilian women, skin peeled off days after the blast, and radiation sickness promised to leave its signature in the very genetic codes of many of the bomb's survivors. The old images and icons of war, where heroic individuals like John Wayne could really make a difference if they were brave, smart, and strong enough, had become instantly obsolete.

When the Jello-box scribblings of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg became news,

Americans' fears escalated. Now we had to face the possibility that we could not only dish out the horrors of Hiroshima, but might have to take them as well.

TV dealt with this Cold War hysteria in three principal ways. The first, and least common, was to react with a realistic pessimism by acknowledging that nuclear war is a strong possibility and that the best we can do is to be ready for it. The most ubiquitous form of this type of programming was the sixty-second Civil Defense announcement: "This is a test. This is only a test. For the next sixty seconds . . ." (In those days the announcement was a reminder of the threat of nuclear war, whereas today's announcement seems more relaxed, keyed to the routine fear of bad weather.)

A few regular series programs used the realistic/pessimistic approach. The medical anthology series Medic (NBC, 1954-1956) aired a segment entitled "Flash of Darkness" in 1955. The episode concerned a worldwide nuclear conflict as seen through the eyes of a Civil Defense medical team in a small town. The doctors performed heroically, but by the end of the episode it was clear that their efforts would all be ultimately in vain. This was almost three decades before the same story line was used on The Day After (ABC, 1983).

But episodes like the one on Medic were anomalous. There were other shows that acknowledged the Cold War but were more optimistic. Most episodes of the super-serious spy series I Led Three Lives (syndicated, 1953) followed the main character, Herbert A. Philbrick, as he outsmarted Godless Communists. Philbrick--who posed as a Russian spy but really worked for the U.S. government--proved week after week that as long as our spies stayed smarter than their spies, we were safe in a bilaterally armed world.

The third and most common response to Cold War danger, however, was to ignore it completely: to portray the world as being as safe as it ever was. This was the approach used by the sitcom, which was quickly becoming the genre of

choice on American television.

As the Soviets were blatantly threatening American borders during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the television sitcom was confirming the sanctity and security of the borders of the nuclear family and its household. Leave It to Beaver (CBS/ABC, 1957-1963) is an example. Like most sitcoms, this program confirmed the naturalness of the close-knit nuclear family as protected and nurturec in the split-level ranch-style house. Trouble was nearly always generated from the outside, precipitated by the likes of Eddie Haskell or Whitey Whitney. In the opening of every episode, June, the latest incarnation of "Mama," would arm her men for their foray into the dangerous world. As the opening credits played, June refused to relinquish her umbilical duties, and she would exit the house and deposit nourishment in the hands of her husband and her boy in the form of lunch bags and briefcases. (The same creators would use this device again in The Munsters [CBS, 1964-1966], in which Lily would supply her husband with a lunchbox the size of a footlocker.)[5]

An institutional constraint within the TV production business helped place the sitcom squarely in the home. As a location for an ongoing series, the home was cheap and easy. A few dedicated sets--a bedroom, a living room, a breakfast nook--and the show was ready to roll. But these locations of convenience were loaded with residual meaning given their cultural context. On TV, the home, as represented by these nuclear family sitcoms, was the last bastion of safe, uncomplicated isolationism.

This message is delivered to the TV viewer using an apparatus that provides further ideological fortification of the Us and Them dichotomy. As John Ellis puts it in Visible Fictions,

> TV confirms the domestic isolation of the viewer, and invites the world to regard the viewer from that position. The viewer is therefore confirmed

> in a basic division of the world between the "inside" of the home, the family and the domestic, and the "outside" of work, politics, public life, the city, the crowd.[6]

By "confirming" this domestic isolation, the family sitcom assumed the role of representing a womb of safety in a dangerous world. The port in the storm of post-war nuclear fear was to be found right in the bosom of "Mama." Even after a run of nontraditional (yet still nuclear in many ways) families as subjects of sitcoms (e.g. Bachelor Father [CBS/NBC/ABC, 1957-1962], One Day at a Time [CBS, 1975-1984], Alice [CBS, 1976-1985]), it should come as no surprise that during the tough-guy Reagan years, the good, old-fashioned, intact family returned to the air with a vengeance in the form of programs like The Cosby Show (NBC, 1984-present) and Growing Pains (ABC, 1985-present).

The inside-outside orientation placed upon the viewer has its parallel within the sitcom text at the level of plot, as Mick Eaton has observed.[7] The home or workplace is typically the safe, stable "inside," which is invaded weekly by characters or complications from the "outside." The plot revolves around the neutralization or expulsion of the alien force, resulting in a return to safety and equilibrium. The situation, which defines the series, is always restored and does not change from week to week. What started inside remains inside. The outside can only come in long enough to be rejected. As Michael DeSousa puts it, "the family serves as a cocoon, a mobile womb which protects and insulates members from the contamination of the outside. Living in such a purified environment is fine--so long as you never have to leave it. The ideal television home is admirably furnished, wonderfully protective and hopelessly static."[8]

What are the implications of placing the symbolic locus of safety in the nuclear family? Making home sweet home the bastion of "inside" in a highly

border-conscious society places an unquestionable premium on the traditional family unit. This alignment of symbol values has been made at the expense of other social movements in the U.S.

Where is the family in "real" post-war society? When men were mobilized overseas during the war, women were forced to enter the domestic work force. When the war was over, many women had concluded that there was more to life than being a "Mama," and decided they were not eager to return to their former role on the "inside." "Mama" as constructed as an ideal before the war was giving way to "Rosie the Riveter." Many families had to have two-career marriages, and many others elected to.

The family unit, like many other features of post-war society, was destined to undergo major realignment. The mass media, especially television, have ideologically directed this reconstruction in ways that encourage certain outcomes over others.

The problem of two-career couples who want children is an example. Anyone who believes in both marriage and sexual equality must also believe in the necessity of marriages in which both spouses are allowed to pursue careers. This presents a difficult problem, however, when the partners also want to have children.

There are numerous solutions to this problem, but TV outside the sitcom format has thrown a wet rag on most of them. The issue is usually one of safety: anything short of a traditional family is often portrayed as dangerous.

A two-career couple may, for example, choose to postpone pregnancy until both careers can accommodate it. TV's rejoinder, via St. Elsewhere, Trapper John, M.D., and Dr. Art Ulene, is that the older you are, the more difficult your pregnancy is likely to be. One who gets one's information exclusively from TV might conclude that any child born to a mother over the age of 35 is a

frontrunning candidate for Down's syndrome. More and more daytime and evening soap operas are also exposing the dangers of delayed pregnancies by pointing out the treacherousness of precariously wound biological clocks. Characters who don't have babies when they can often find that they can't when they want to.

Next option: have the children early, but send them to daycare. TV also has a caveat for this. Countless news stories fill us in on the ghastly fates that await our children at the hands of perverted or incompetent daycare operators. Abductors and molesters lurk everywhere. In the blockbuster TV-movie Adam (NBC, 1983), the child wasn't even at a daycare facility. He was shopping with his mother, and she just let him out of her sight for a second. The message is clear. Deprive your child of a safe nuclear home and he or she may end up decapitated or with his or her picture on the side of a milk carton.

Even the choice of postponing marriage is answered by television. Most news programs carried the Newsweek story[9] that pointed out that a single woman of 40 has a better chance of being killed by a terrorist than of ever getting married. Plug into the images of "old maids" that television has supplied, and again the message is clear. Who wants to be Alice when you can be Carol Brady?

These negative images of nontraditional approaches to family are buttressed by the positive images of the old-fashioned way of doing things. The Cosby Show, perhaps the biggest sitcom phenomenon ever, has indeed added the element not only of a two-career marriage, but one in which both spouses hold socially validated, rewarding jobs. Yet all the show does is to confirm everything we learned in Father--(and in this case Mother, too)--Knows Best (CBS/NBC, 1954-1962). If Cliff and Clair Huxtable can have kids at an early age and still both complete professional school and become leading contributors in their respective fields and have a fulfilling sex life and raise drug-free kids who really

communicate--then why can't we? Daycare is a cop-out. Kids are safest in the home, and Cosby proves it.

Sitcom provides the ideological antidote or complement to George Gerbner's "scary world."[10] While action-adventure and other noncomedic forms provide the "stick" warning us about venturing outside the home, sitcom offers a "carrot" in the form of a vision of security in domestic life. As Lawrence Mintz notes, the value espoused in sitcom is "the pursuit of serenity."[11]

There are some exceptions. Murray Smith points out in a recent paper that The Young Ones seems to reverse the customary roles of Inside and Outside.[12] And some change may be in the air in U.S. TV, even if only in the form of poorly rated new sitcoms. As advertisers clamor more and more for a bigger audience of young, urban-dwelling professionals, family sitcoms seem to be exploring slightly more untraditional grounds.

In the 1987-88 season alone, four new sitcoms are about families sans Mamas. My Two Dads (NBC) concerns two men who had both been in love and sleeping with the same woman thirteen years ago. As the series opens, the woman has died, but it seems even she never knew which of the two men was the father of the child. It was her dying wish that both men raise the young girl. The series is distinctive not only because its premise is based on an unidentified sperm cell, but because the girl is being brought up in an "alternative lifestyle." Valerie's Family (NBC) is also exploring new options with the death of the woman named in the title, although she has been replaced with a surrogate mother. Full House (ABC) concerns a house full of men trying to raise a house full of kids. The mother of the family in I Married Dora (ABC) dies when her plane is hijacked by terrorists (!) and disappears into a mountain range. In addition to these sitcoms, ABC's comedy/drama Thirtysomething paints a claustrophobic picture of family life and at least raises the possibility that safety is not all it's cracked

up to be.

It appears that the yuppie creed may have "come home" to NBC, and also ABC, but things haven't changed as much as it may seem. After the death of his wife, the husband in I Married Dora elects to save his Hispanic housekeeper from deportation by marrying her. He, of course, won't have any of the usual responsibilities of marriage, but he gets to keep his great housekeeper (and good help is really hard to find, as the pilot episode pointed out). She gets to stay in the U.S. and have the privilege of cleaning up after him and his kids. That's the situation for the series, the premise which establishes the boundary of inside and outside. The "I" in the title is a sort of composite of three other sitcom "I"s: I Love Lucy (WASP-Hispanic marriage; CBS, 1951-1956), I Married Joan (series title; NBC, 1952-1955), and I Dream of Jeannie (initial pairing not a result of love; NBC, 1965-1970). (We might also add the "my" from My Three Sons [ABC/CBS, 1960-1972], which also features a widower father.) In I Married Dora, as well as in other recent sitcoms, what is happening is not change so much as a return, in typical sitcomedic fashion, to the stable, safely defined parameters of the genre. Ratings, demographics, and other forces may occasionally push sitcoms in new directions from the "outside," but the form resists change, just as its characters do. Life imitates art!

Notes

[1] David Grote, The End of Comedy: The Sit-Com and the Comedic Tradition (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1983), pp. 104-105.

[2] J. Fred MacDonald, "The Cold War as Entertainment in 'Fifties Television," Journal of Popular Film and Television, 7 (1978), 3-31, quote on 9-10.

[3] See George Lipsitz, "The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs," Cultural Anthropology, 1 (November 1986), 355-387; Leila J. Rupp, "Woman's Place Is in the War: Propaganda and Public Opinion in the U.S. and Germany, 1939-1945," in Women of America! A History, ed. Carol R. Berkin and Mary B. Norton (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979); Maureen Honey, Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda During World War II (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984); Marty Jezer, The Dark Ages (Boston: South End Press, 1982); and Darrell Yoshito Hamamoto, "Television Situation Comedy and Post-War Liberal Ideology: 1950-1980," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Irvine, 1981. David Marc has valuable and amusing insights on the simultaneous development of TV and The Bomb. See his Demographic Vistas: Television in American Culture (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), pp. 148 ff.

[4] Horace Newcomb, TV: The Most Popular Art (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1974).

[5] Newcomb (ibid., pp. 43-44) makes a similar point about the opening sequences of a number of other sitcoms. The opening of The Donna Reed Show (ABC, 1958-1966) follows a similar format. The Jetsons (ABC, 1962-1964) is an interesting inversion, in which the father dispatches the children and mother to school and shopping.

[6] John Ellis, Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 166.

[7] Mick Eaton, "Television Situation Comedy," Screen, 19, No. 4 (Winter 1978/1979), 61-89, see 70 ff. For a slightly different approach based on a foundation of Ingroup-Outgroup, see Sylvia Moss, "The New Comedy," Television Quarterly, 4, No. 1 (Winter 1965), 42-45.

[8] Michael A. DeSousa, "The Curious Evolution of the Video Family," Television Quarterly, 16, No. 4 (Winter 1979-1980), 43-45, quote on 44.

[9] Eloise Salholz, with Renee Michael, Mark Starr, Shawn Doherty, Pamela Abramson, and Pat Wingert, "Too Late for Prince Charming?", Newsweek, 2 June 1986, pp. 54-57, 61. For a refutation of this story, see Nancy Shute, "There's a Mr. Right for Women Over 30," St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 30 April 1987, p. 3B (syndicated by Words by Wire).

[10] See George Gerbner and Larry Gross, "Living with Television: The Violence Profile," Journal of Communication, 26, No. 2 (Spring 1976), 172-199; and George Gerbner and Larry Gross, "The Scary World of TV's Heavy Viewer," Psychology Today, April 1976, pp. 41-45, 89.

[11] Lawrence E. Mintz, "Situation Comedy," in TV Genres: A Handbook and Reference Guide, ed. Brian G. Rose (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), pp. 107-129, quote on p. 118. Mintz is referring to an idea of John Bryant's.

[12] Murray Smith, "Flatulent Conceptions: The Young Ones, Inoculation and Emesis," in Television Studies Annual I, ed. Gary Burns and Robert Thompson (New York: Praeger, in press).